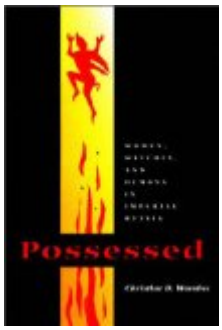
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Christine Worobec.** *Possessed: Women, Witches and Demons in Imperial Russia.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001. xv + 206 pp. $38.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87580-273-2.




**Reviewed by** Lee Farrow

**Published on** H-Russia (April, 2002)

Stressed or Possessed?: ***Klikushi*** in Imperial Russia

Christine Worobec's recent book, ***Possessed: Women, Witches and Demons in Imperial Russia***, is a fascinating look at witchcraft and demonic possession in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Russia, examining not only the reaction of the state and the organized church, but also that of Russia's nineteenth-century intellectuals and medical professionals. The focus of Worobec's study is female peasant demoniacs, or ***klikushi***, women who claimed to be possessed by demons and were believed to be so by others as well. The phenomenon of ***klikushestvo*** shares many characteristics with witchcraft and possession in the American colonies and Western Europe, embodying fears of female sexuality, victimization of marginalized members of society and retaliation by weaker members, who could empower themselves by accusing others. But there are also some important distinctions. The occurrence of klikushestvo persisted far later into the modern period than did the witch hunts in America or Europe. In addition, the Russian case is different in that the Orthodox Church remained an important part of peasant culture and thus played a central role in the drama of klikushestvo, and was intimately involved in the definition, punishment and/or treatment of demoniacs. Worobec uses a variety of sources--the archive of the Preobrazhenskii Prikaz and Secret Chancery, the Spiritual Regulation and other eighteenth-century decrees and Senate decision, nineteenth-century religious journals and newspapers and the writings of nineteenth-century intellectuals and doctors--to compile a database of over three hundred cases of demon possession.

Klikushestvo appeared in Russia as early as the eleventh century and had consistent features: during mass or in the presence of holy objects, the klikushi swore, screamed, made animal sounds, convulsed and tore at their hair and clothes. They also occasionally shrieked out the name of the person that they believed cursed them. They believed that they had been hexed by means of foods or other types of spells which could only be reversed by exorcism, the intervention of the saints or the lifting of the spell by the witch who

had cast it. Initially, the phenomenon of klikushestvo was shared by all classes, but the influence of the Enlightenment on the nobility meant that by the mid-nineteenth century, demoniacs were mostly peasants, or city-dwellers of recent peasant background. The gender distribution of demoniacs changed over time as well. Whereas in the medieval period, demoniacs were predominantly male, by the end of the eighteenth century, they were mostly female. The term klikushi (female shrieker) is a gender-laden term which implies, Worobec argues, that the loss of control over the body is a feminine tendency.

Worobec begins her analysis of klikushestvo with a discussion of the evolution of state attitudes toward demon possession. Prior to the reign of Peter the Great, there had been attempts to deal with individuals who used accusations of witchcraft as a weapon against others, particularly members of the royal family. Thus when Peter initiated legislation to rout out such individuals, it was not without precedent. Peter viewed shriekers as charlatans who claimed demon possession to harm others and, therefore, during his reign feigning possession became a punishable crime. This attitude was reinforced by subsequent rulers; in reality, however, few shriekers were detained for questioning. Instead, throughout the eighteenth century, investigators were more interested in capturing magicians, sorcerers and blasphemers. This tendency provoked the Senate in 1770 to criticize the courts for punishing the alleged sorcerers instead of the shriekers, whom they viewed as "dissolute" women and the real source of the problem. The situation changed in the nineteenth century when shriekers were often convicted of fraud and judges began to consult doctors more frequently to medically evaluate demoniacs. It was at this time that klikushestvo began to be defined as a form of hysteria.

The Orthodox Church's approach to klikushestvo also changed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Generally speaking, the Orthodox Church believed that Christians were constantly being tested by the devil, and that sometimes when their defenses were down, they could be possessed. Victory over the devil, then, was a prominent theme in the Orthodox Church. The centrality of this doctrine of the battle of good versus evil meant that the Church tended to take the phenomenon of klikushestvo seriously. Thus, in the eighteenth century, the church continued to draw a connection between witchcraft and sorcery and demon possession, and believed strongly in the power of exorcism. Even in the face of the Spiritual Regulation and other laws which demanded that klikushi be handed over to civil authorities, the church was reluctant to cooperate. During the nineteenth century, the church's position became more complicated as the psychiatric profession began to weigh in on the matter of klikushestvo. As demoniacs shifted to a largely female affliction, psychiatrists were quick to label it as a form of hysteria. The reluctance of the medical profession to view possession as a spiritual matter had a strong influence on the church. By the end of the nineteenth century, miracle stories officially recognized by the church rarely included klikushi among those cured, a substantial shift from earlier times. This does not mean that the matter was definitely resolved. On the contrary, there was considerable debate among church officials and clergy over the existence of miracles in the increasingly scientific world. As a result, the church gave mixed messages, both including the cure of klikushi in the public descriptions of canonization celebrations, and at the same time, urging parish priests to send klikushi to medical professionals. The church was in a difficult position. It recognized the advances of science, but could not abandon the notion of demon possession since doing so would have undercut its own doctrines. Thus the church consulted doctors and even accepted their diagnoses, but church-sanctioned exorcism continued as well.

In the nineteenth century, the psychiatric profession became fascinated by klikushestvo and

wrote extensively about it. Many doctors adopted European theories about hysteria and concluded that klikushestvo was a special form of this illness. A minority attributed it to somnambulism. In all cases, nineteenth-century psychiatrists believed klikushestvo to be a mild, but curable form of mental illness, but with a definite link to female sexuality. Thus theories frequently included references to uterine or menstrual irregularities, sexual repression or sexual overstimulation. Because psychiatrists viewed klikushestvo as a medical condition, they were eager to take control of the treatment of klikushi away from the clergy and popular healers. This determination went beyond medical concerns, however, to include a mission to civilize the Russian peasantry and to free it from the powerful grip of the Orthodox Church.

In her conclusion, Worobec poses the question, "is it possible for the historian to uncover the identity of these possessed individuals?" (p. 189). Modern psychiatrists view episodes of klikushestvo as a form of mass hysteria, emphasizing the largely female character of late nineteenth-century demon possession. Meanwhile, other scientists--anthropologists who prefer theories of cultural relativism--argue that any rigid scientific approach ignores the fact that standards for acceptable behavior differ from class to class and from culture to culture. Some historians have postulated that klikushestvo may have had a biological causation, such as food poisoning, specifically, ingestion of ergot, a fungus that develops on rye under wet and cold conditions. Though this is an interesting theory, Worobec rejects it, arguing that neither the symptoms of ergotism nor its geographic patterns match the episodes of klikushestvo. Moreover, late nineteenth-century psychiatrists, who were looking for non-spiritual explanations, failed to ever mention ergotism as a possibility. In the end, Worobec rejects "both pathological and biological explanations...in favor of the conclusion that the phenomenon constituted a sociocultural expression that allowed social actors, in this case weaker members of the society, to release stress and readjust their circumstances" (p. 192).

Worobec, then, argues that klikushestvo was the result of stress, citing the coincidence of food shortages and other stressful occurrences and outbreaks of demon possession. Possible evidence for this theory is the fact that stress can lower the body's ability to retain calcium and that low calcium combined with other stressors could result in tremors, convulsions and disorientation. Some anthropologists have tested this theory and determined that there is a correlation between a woman's age and her likelihood of demon possession, since certain age groups seem to suffer from higher levels of stress. As Worobec explains, these scientists have found a higher incidence of demon possession among "both older and younger married women among the victims, including those who have been recently married and have experienced marital tensions with spouses and in-laws in extended households, married women whose marital ability appears to be threatened, and postmenopausal women who social status has declined"(p. 202). Worobec seems convinced by this argument, but I found it problematic: it seems so all-encompassing that I wondered how many women would *not* have fallen into these categories. Moreover, to say that stress was the cause for claims of demon possession begs for greater elaboration.

Worobec's examination of witchcraft is interesting in that it focuses on the other half of the equation, on those who believed themselves to be cursed by witches rather than on the alleged witches themselves. However, after reading Worobec's study, I was still not clear on exactly what the klikushi themselves believed about their condition. Did they consciously use possession as a vehicle for criticizing their position in their families and in society in general? Or was it an unconscious rebellion? Worobec seems to believe that klikushi truly thought themselves possessed, but fails to satisfactorily discuss modern psychiatric

theory about this phenomenon. She points out that klikushi have reemerged in the post-Soviet period. Are these individuals also suffering from stress and low calcium? Do they fit the age profile as well? On the other hand, Worobec's word choices seem to indicate a different interpretation. By calling an episode of klikushestvo a "drama" in which family members, the church and the possessed all played their "roles," Worobec seems to imply that all participants were aware that the klikushi were using a fabricated demon possession as a means of social defiance. Surely, this can not be the case either. The clergy and other members of the community, particularly men, would not have looked favorably upon a woman challenging the status quo, and would not have assisted her in this challenge. In fact, Worobec describes that in some cases when incarceration was threatened, the klikushi quickly recovered "not because the stressors have been removed and the demons expelled" but because "the threats came from individuals who did not subscribe to the possession myth" (p. 206). Again, this would imply that klikushi were very consciously making claims of demon possession in an attempt to defy social norms and express dissatisfaction with their lives. In fact many of their own contemporaries recognized that nineteenth-century women led difficult lives; as Worobec observes, writers such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky viewed klikushi sympathetically, as victims of serfdom, the brutality of men and their environment in general.

To what degree, then, were klikushi feigning demon possession to empower themselves in a society where they often held little power, or officially-recognized power? Worobec makes a brief, but interesting, comparison between klikushi and holy fools. Both of these, she argues, were examples of how the Orthodox Church and popular beliefs were accepting of behavior that was considered psychotic by medical professionals. Both groups were disruptive in public and were, by and large, not held responsible for their actions. Holy fools could openly criticize the political and social status quo, while possession gave klikushi a similar outlet for their frustrations. Though Worobec's observations are interesting, one is left wishing that she had explored the comparison in greater detail.

All in all, however this is a fascinating book that touches on a number of important topics: the perception and definition of witch craft and possession both by the Orthodox Church and the government, popular religious culture, the attitudes of Russian intellectuals toward peasant culture and the changing definition of deviance in the psychiatric community. Moreover, the examination of klikushestvo reveals much about the role of women in Imperial Russia, their ability to publicly challenge those roles and the reaction of others to these challenges.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia

**Citation:** Lee Farrow. Review of Worobec, Christine. ***Possessed: Women, Witches and Demons in Imperial Russia.*** H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6152